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White House Pressed on Iraq Assistance

House Panel Moves Closer to Criminal Investigation of Prewar Policy and Political Showdown

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The House Judiciary Committee has asked President Bush to provide documents and witnesses to explain his administration's prewar assistance to Iraq, moving a step closer to seeking a criminal investigation of the policy and setting the stage for a political showdown.

Among the witnesses sought are White House counsel C. Boyden Gray and Robert A. Mosbacher, former commerce secretary and now general chairman of the president's reelection campaign. The alteration of a Commerce Department document related to Iraq policy has been identified as a potential subject of criminal action.

The committee's request, in a letter to the White House Friday, is a prelude to a committee vote on whether to ask the attorney general to examine the need for an independent counsel to investigate possible crimes by administration officials. The vote could come by the end of the month, according to congressional staffers.

Judiciary Chairman Jack Brooks (D-Tex.) said in his letter that the committee would proceed even if the administration refuses to cooperate. Earlier this month, senior Democrats told the Judiciary Committee that the administration had blocked their attempts to get information and suggested that laws might have been broken in executing policy toward Iraq before it invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

At a news conference yesterday in Rio de Janeiro, where he was attending the Earth Summit, President Bush called the congressional investigation "a pure, political inquest" but added, "we will continue to cooperate with Congress. . . .

"I... think there is an unhealthy dose of politics involved."

—Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.)

"Our policy was well known. We tried to bring Saddam Hussein into the family of nations. That policy was not successful. We did not enhance his nuclear, biological or chemical weapon capability, a charge recklessly made in this political year. And when we failed, and when he took an aggression, the whole world joined with us in standing [against] it," Bush said of support for the U.S.-led effort to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in the Persian Gulf War.

"And now some of the very people that opposed U.S. action are trying to redeem themselves by a lot of political inquiry," Bush said. "And I don't think the American people are going to stand for it."

Committee Republicans complained that the independent counsel issue was driven by election-year politics. But some also said they recognized the potential danger in allegations that administration policies assisted in the Iraqi military buildup before the gulf war.

"These charges are proliferating," said Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), a senior committee member. "I think they are serious. I also think there is an unhealthy dose of politics involved. I think the committee will ask for an independent counsel anyway, but it might be helpful in the public-relations struggle not to leave these charges unanswered."

Brooks said he wanted the administration to tell its side at a June 23 hearing before asking the committee to vote on seeking an independent counsel.

Two areas where Democrats say a special prosecutor may be warranted are looking into the alteration of a list of Commerce Department export licenses for Iraq and determining whether the administration deliberately misled congressional committees.